

All set for the fourth act

There is more excitement under the Middle American exterior of Richard Nixon than ever before in his life. It is controlled, of course; but as evidence that it is there, witness the last few days: a dash from Washington to the Azores, back home, then Florida, Washington, on to New York, home again, off to Bermuda and at last to the White House for Christmas, but only for a few days.

Nixon is preparing for the fourth act of his presidency. The upcoming year has been meticulously scripted to produce dramatic changes in our national life; indeed, in the world. But he is also savoring the closing scenes of the third act. The bright glitter in his eye and the easy smile show his satisfaction with his third year in office. The future can come apart, and Presidents know that better than almost anybody. Still, the record of the third year is down in black and white, and he considers it good. From the vagueness of the first two years came a certain direction in foreign policy, out of the economic chaos a plan of action and commitment. A man who too often seemed ill-served by subordinates has fashioned a competent team of principals and asserted clear leadership at last.

He lives like a modern Spartan, moving restlessly from office to office within the presidential complex. He refuses to take a drink of anything stronger than a sip of wine at official dinners during the week. He is always concerned about what he calls "a quality of dignity," always wanting to be "cool, calm and sober" should the call of crisis come in the night. He wears glasses now and then when he reads, but never in public. He puffs a pipe for a few minutes sometimes when the fire is going and he wants to talk by the hearthside. When he first came to power, there was a towel spread over the ottoman for his feet, but that has disappeared and he now puts his presidential size 11s right on the fabric as if he owned it. His lunches still last only ten minutes but he doesn't use catsup on the cottage cheese any longer, and such singular comestibles as okra and chili peppers have found their way into those noontime breaks. He has quit saying "Let me make one thing perfectly clear."

More adamantly than ever, the President refuses to handle decisions others can make, so that his mind will not be "cluttered with trivia." He will not begin the day with the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* because they make him mad; anger, he believes, clouds his vision. His reading now includes Herman Wouk's new novel *The Winds of War*, a story

of World War II, still a favorite Nixon subject. He works in an antiseptic cocoon of his own devising—clean room, clean desk, no news tickers or TV sets. He has a profound fear of drowning in the daily flood of events, emotion, advice and criticism.

He remains something of an enigma to many Americans and has been criticized for his aloofness. He is aware of the problem but he finds support in a quote from one of his heroes, Charles de Gaulle: "There can be no power without mystery. There must always be a 'something' which others cannot altogether fathom, which puzzles them, stirs them, and rivets their attention . . ."

In the Azores for his December meeting with French President Georges Pompidou, Nixon stayed up through the second night glued to the radio, listening to the Washington Redskins-Los Angeles Rams football game. At 4:30 he jingled assistant Robert Haldeman out of deepsleep with a gleeful "The Redskins won." A few hours later, walking out into the courtyard behind the city hall of Angra, the tiny, white-washed village clinging to a cliff above the ocean, he announced to newsmen that progress had been made in solving the international monetary problem. It was as if he did that sort of thing every day. Then he smiled, waved and walked away, leaving it for his aides to reveal that he had agreed to devalue the dollar.

In Florida, he listened to a distraught woman who came to his gate pleading for help because her husband had been captured at sea by Cubans. Three days later he stood in that famous old hall of the Smithsonian beneath the original Wright Brothers' airplane and told the

world that the ten major industrial nations which had just met there had reached agreement on realigning their currencies, as a direct result of his devaluation decision. With him in that room were the tiny *Spirit of St. Louis* which Charles Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic and the Apollo 11 capsule which took Neil Armstrong to the moon. They helped reflect his philosophical theme for the year, his appeal to America to rekindle the spirit of '76, the spirit which had conquered the air, the Atlantic and space.

The President's box score for the past year is impressive. Besides the bold movements in foreign policy and economics, American involvement in the war in Vietnam is in its final phase. The Supreme Court has taken on the Nixon stamp. The momentum of Nixon's reelection drive is building. The promise in all these things, however, is even greater than their mathematical sum, and how they mature will affect far more than the fortunes of Richard Nixon.

In any case, his control is crucially limited. He has not yet captured the hearts and minds of the people, the source of all real power to reform. While Vietnam is ending, it is not yet ended. While the economy is started off in fresh directions, it is not yet robust. While there is much lip service to the spirit of '76, it is not yet planted along Main Street. While Nixon is headed for Peking and Moscow, the "generation of peace" which he pursues remains clouded by India-Pakistan, the Middle East and a host of other tangled conflicts. The President has built hope high in his third year. Turning this into hard reality in the fourth will be a trial that dwarfs every challenge Richard Nixon has faced so far.



At a milk producers' convention in Chicago in September, Nixon demurely accepted the applause of delegates and other guests.